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SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/INS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/30/2019

TAGS: PREL PGOV AF IN

SUBJECT: AFGHAN FOREIGN MINISTER TALKS PARTNERSHIP WITH INDIA

Classified By: Political Counselor Uzra Zeya for reasons 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: In a July 26-27 visit, Afghan Foreign Minister Spanta announced the establishment of an India-Afghanistan Partnership Council and discussed security concerns with Prime Minister Singh, Foreign Minister Krishna, and National Security Advisor Narayanan. Embassy contacts called the visit routine. A knowledgeable source suggested that Prime Minister Singh wants an even closer relationship with Afghanistan, but his Congress Party-led coalition is not in line. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Afghan Minister of Foreign Affairs Dr. Rangin Dadfar Spanta on July 26-27 paid a visit to India at the invitation of Indian External Affairs Minister Krishna. The Joint Statement reaffirmed their resolve to combat terrorism, underlined the strategic partnership between India and Afghanistan, and noted the establishment of an India-Afghanistan Partnership Council (NOTE: The full text of the joint statement is available at <http://meaindia.nic.in/secframe.php?sec=jd>. END NOTE). The Council will focus on political consultation, capacity development and education, power and water, culture, trade and industry, health, and agriculture. Dr. Spanta also met with Prime Minister Singh and National Security Advisor Narayanan.

¶3. (C) The Indian Ministry of External Affairs had little to share with us so soon after the visit, but Afghan hand Qamar Agha, journalist and professor at Jamia Millia Islamia's Centre for West Asian Studies, characterized Spanta's visit as low-profile relationship maintenance. According to Agha, the deliverable of a Partnership Council is consistent with India's sizable aid commitment to Afghanistan. India is diligent in maintaining its long standing relationship with Afghanistan to balance against Pakistan, Iran, and even Turkey, according to Agha. Both countries' primary worry right now is Pakistan.

¶5. (C) The visit did not draw much media reaction in New Delhi. Pramit Pal Chaudhuri of the Hindustan Times related that the Afghan Ambassador to India told him in a private conversation that the visit was routine. Chaudhuri thought that the Afghan MFA wanted to consult with his Indian

counterpart on the controversial joint statement issued by PM Singh and PM Gilani in Sharm el Sheikh, and on the August 20 elections in Afghanistan. According to Chaudhari, Prime Minister Singh wants to deepen the India-Afghanistan relationship, but the Congress Party does not have the appetite for further bold moves in India's foreign policy following the political fallout from the Sharm el Sheikh Joint Statement.

¶6. (C) There have been some critics who see the visit as a missed opportunity. Dr. Ved Pratap Vaidik, Chairman of the Council for Indian Foreign Policy, called the visit hurriedly organized and not well planned. In addition to routine bilateral issues, he said that the consultations were on Af-Pak, the Taliban, and Baluchistan. Senior journalist and commentator Mahendra Ved commented that Afghanistan has always had a good comfort level with India, and that the visit was a chance for the two sides to discuss regional dynamics like radical Islam and Pakistan, as well as Afghanistan's elections.

ROEMER